DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 166 629 CG 013 244

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TITLE Effects of Background Factors on Attitude Change During Professional Training.
PUB DATE [74]
NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Change; Career Development; *Environmental Influences; *Family Influence; Higher Education; *Medical Students; Racial Differences; *Self Concept; Sex Differences; *Socioeconomic Background; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The relationship of race, sex, religion, college, and socio-economic factors to modifications in attitudes of three consecutive Cornell University Medical College classes was investigated. Results indicated that: (1) background factors are more important in attitude changes toward self than toward environment; (2) students with lower socio-economic backgrounds experience the most extensive changes in attitudes; (3) students from private colleges are more disillusioned by medical school than are those from other college categories; (4) Black students are more prone than white ones to develop conservative attitudes; (5) women develop more career ambivalence and status problems than do men; and (6) the freshman year shows most changes in attitudes. (Author)

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Effects of Background Factors on Attitude Change During Professional Training

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the relationship of race, sex, religious, college and socio/economic factors to modifications in attitudes of three consecutive Cornell University Medical College classes. Results: background factors are more important to attitude changes toward self than toward environment; students with lower socio/economic backgrounds experience the most extensive changes in attitudes; students from private colleges are more disillusioned by medical school than are those from other college categories; black students are more prone than white to develop conservative attitudes; women develop more career ambivalence and status problems than do men. The freshman year shows most changes in attitudes.

Effects of Background Factors on Attitude Change During Professional Training

Educators have shown increasing interest over the past 25 years in the types of professional and personal attitudes developed by graduate level students during the course of their professional training. Merton, Reader, and Kendall [1] and Hammond and Kern [2] have found that efforts to teach specific attitudes are ineffective. Harris [3], however, has provided persuasive evidence that students are inclined to develop professional attitudes increasingly like those of their teachers, and to show "anti-modeling" reactions to the threatening aspects of instructors.

The present investigation examined the extent to which certain pre-professional school patterning factors contribute - and in most instances continued to contribute - to attitude change and development in medical students. Specifically, the study sought to show that modifications in students' attitudes toward themselves and toward various experimental concepts related to elements in, or reactions to, their environment could be associated with background factors of race, sex, religion, college education, and socio/economic origins. As a secondary goal, the study sought to determine if certain years in medical school were more liable than others to produce modifications in students' attitudes.

METHOD

Population

Cornell University Medical College Classes of 1974, 1975, and 1976 served as subjects for the study. Classes averaged 100 students apiece and

participation was voluntary. The involvement of individual classes was comparable and, over the seven-year course of the project, an average of 72% of the students participated.

Students were classified according to the following five background sub-groups, which incorporate 13 sub-categories:

Race	Sex	Religion	Category of College Attended	Father's Occupation*
White	Male	Catholic	Private	Professional
Black (American)	Female	Protestant	Public	White Collar
		Jew	Parochial	Blue Collar

*Father's occupation served as a socio/economic index.

Test Instruments

Following Osgood's technique [4], a semantic differential test was constructed using 16 scales to evaluate each of the following 16 concepts:

Me	Religion	Medical Student	Welfare
Trouble	Earn	Sickness	Socialized Medicine
Fear	Work	Political Liberalism	White
Professor	Competition	Political Conservatism	Non-White

The Adjective Check List Test [5] was used to provide a measure of self-evaluation.

Procedure

Students were administered the tests during their first week in medical school. They were repeated thereafter at the end of each of the four years of training. Longitudinal trends were evaluated by an analysis

of variance of concept and ACL measures over three years for combined classes and combined scores. Individual class years were evaluated by Wilcoxon's Matched-Pairs Signed-Ranks Test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the two tests, the ACL proved to be more discriminating in identifying differences between sub-groups while the semantic differential was more useful in tapping yearly class trends. Excepting the concept me, the focus of the semantic differential test was "external" while that of the ACL was "internal." The category of college attended before medical school was found to be the single most important factor related to changes in attitudes with "internal" focus. Sex was a close second. Religion proved to be least important factor, while race was second least. The socio/economic factor, represented by fathers' occupations, varied the most, proving to be exceedingly significant if the father were a blue-collar worker and comparatively insignificant if he were within the white-collar category. The extent to which attitudes with "external" focus changed was comparable for the various sub-groups.

Not surprisingly, students from lower socio/economic backgrounds - who had the most to gain from a professional education - felt the greatest sense of fulfillment at the end of their medical training. However, it is noteworthy that, despite the achievement of professional status, these students were the most hesitant to seek positions of control or responsibility. By comparison, students with fathers in the professions were inclined to competitively pursue such positions. These contrasting patterns suggest that medical school

and the achievement of professional status alone may not do a great deal to alter the role relationships instilled by a student's socio/economic origins. The fact that students with fathers in white-collar occupations showed almost no modifications in the areas registering such distinct - and differing - changes as those noted for students with blue-collar or professional fathers may well indicate that these students experienced comparatively little pressure (internal or external) to move upward in occupational status or to perpetuate an occupational level already established by the father.

The strinkingly lower morale and differing perception of their situation of students who had graduated from private colleges and graduates from other categories of undergraduate institutions was of considerable interest. The enriched programs from which the former frequently came seem, at the same time, to have contributed qualities, needs, or expectations which, in important ways, were unmet in medical school. Medical school shares the high achievement orientation of the better private colleges; but it also has a tendency to supplant the personal sense of being "special," often fostered by private colleges, with a sense of occupational specialness. More important, it may often fail to provide the sorts of situational structures for experience and learning that will adequately reinforce the individualism and originality in thought which our results show are most typical of students with private undergraduate education. This failure may be a major factor in the surprisingly high degree of occupational disillusionment and cynicism that developed among students from private colleges.

Women students appeared more liable than men to the development of feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. The keener interests in institutionalized social care and medical services shown by women, and their relatively greater increase in competitiveness, may act to offset felt differences in status with men, but do not seem to counterbalance their stronger basic feelings of occupational uncertainty.

Black medical students made greater gains in the development of feelings of self-sufficiency, self-confidence, and self-expression than did whites - developments due in some part, no doubt, to the necessity for many of these students to cover more ground because of the higher relative frequency among them of underprivileged backgrounds. What is more notable, however, is the greater shift of black than white students' attitudes toward political and social conservatism - attitudes generally associated with the white middle and upper classes. Perhaps this is not surprising. However, what may seem problematic to some is the relatively slower development of interest among black students in broad medical service programs and concomitant devaluing, relative to whites, of the black race. This suggests that the medical school experience may engender in many black students a middle-class, "white"-oriented set which may, at times, conflict with the training goals of medical school programs for the disadvantaged - goals not likely to be shared in the end by young black physicians whose values and identification are no longer easily compatible with major professional service commitments to underserved populations.

When attitude changes were evaluated for each year by class and by comparisons of first and last tests, attitude changes with "external" focus were more clear-cut than those with "internal" focus. The freshman year was found to be unquestionably the most important for shifts in attitudes with "external" focus while, less definitively, the sophomore year was found to be the most important for changes in attitudes with "internal" focus. From first test to last test, the extent to which changes occurred in attitudes with "external" focus was found to be strikingly progressive by class year. Thus the Class of '74 showed fewer (almost no) changes in these attitudes than did the Class of '75 which, in turn, showed fewer changes than did the Class of '76 (which showed a great many).

It is suggested that this latter phenomenon is a function, in no small part, of the degree to which the three classes were a part of, and carried residuals from, the angry, reactive, socially militant climate of college campuses in the 1960s. The Class of '74 passed all of its college years in the '60s. It graduated the year of the Kent State killings, an event that saw a climax among college students of feelings of rage and impotence - feelings which were consolidated by the disclosure of the Cambodian bombings in 1971, the year the Class of '75 graduated, and the Watergate scandal in 1972, the year the Class of '76 graduated. From the very beginning of the present decade, frustration and a sense of defeat in social causes has precipitated among students of college age and older a rapid shift back to an emphasis on self (as against social) concern - a shift incorporating a sharp reduction in the

protective resistance to attitudinal changes toward the "establishment" that was one product of the "we" and "they" atmosphere of the '60s. Funkenstein [6] emphasizes the powerful influence of a student's generation on the development of his attitudes. The long-term reactions of our three medical school classes in attitudes with "external" focus seem consistent with this position.

SUMMARY

Students in three consecutive Cornell University Medical College classes, averaging 72 participants apiece, were given Adjective Check List and Semantic Differential tests five times during the course of their training (at the onset and at the end of each year) to evaluate modifications in attitudes toward themselves and toward various experimental concepts to determine if changes in these attitudes could be related to background factors of race, sex, religion, category of college attended, and socio/economic status (as gauged by the category of fathers' occupation). The extent to which such attitude changes occurred in any given year of medical school was also examined. The results suggest that:

1. Background factors are more clearly involved in students' attitude changes toward themselves (internal focus) than they are in attitude changes tied to concepts related to elements in, or reactions to, their environment (external focus).

2. Students with lower socio/economic backgrounds show more extensive and more positive changes in attitudes than do students in any category of any other sub-group.

3. Students educated in private colleges become more cynical, have lower morale, show less occupational satisfaction, and feel less sense of fulfillment than do students from public or parochial colleges.

4. Relative to white students, black students are more prone to shift toward conservative political and social attitudes, to develop interest in social service programs at a slower rate, and to evaluate the black race less positively.

5. Women students experience more career ambivalence, develop more personal insecurity, and have more problems with status than do men.

6. The freshman year has the most profound effect on changes in attitudes with "external" focus while, less definitively, the sophomore year is most important for changes in attitudes with "internal" focus.

The results suggest that, in varying degrees, race, sex, religion, category of college attended, and socio/economic class are salient factors in the process by which a medical student comes to evaluate himself and to assess, or react to, his environment by the end of his training in medical school.

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